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ABSTRACT

This paper describes three instructional strategies designed to support community building in an online graduate teacher education course: (1) MOO (Multi-User Dimensions Object Oriented) field trips, in which participants are introduced to text-based virtual environments on the Internet through metaphoric online "field trips"; (2) integrating experts into the final project; and (3) small group case studies, allowing participants to work closely with two or three of their classmates on problem scenarios that are aligned to their teaching contexts. The impacts of these strategies are also discussed briefly. (MES)

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Three Community Building Strategies and Their Impacts in an On-Line Course

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Abstract: This paper describes three instructional strategies designed to support community building in an on-line graduate teacher education course. The impacts of these strategies are also discussed briefly.

Two common problems noted in the literature on distance education include a sense of isolation on the learners' part and insufficient support for learning. Many researchers (see, for example, Dede 1997; Zhang 1998) propose that the development of learning communities helps to provide interaction and support for distance learners, thereby breaking down these barriers to learning. Moore (1997) notes that a "good quality distance education program not only delivers high quality presentation of information but also provides a high quality personal experience for every individual student to interact with that information..." (p.6). This paper describes three instructional strategies designed to support such personal experiences in an on-line graduate teacher education course. The impacts of these strategies, which support such experiences by encouraging the development of a learning community, are also discussed briefly.

The course described is *L530: Computer-assisted language learning*, an elective in the Master's program in Language Education at a large midwestern university. Participants in this methods course are pre-service and in-service teachers of second or foreign languages. The Web-based course is offered three times per year and runs concurrently with the on-site version once per year. More about the development of the course can be found in Egbert & Chao (in press).

Strategy 1: MOO Field Trips

MOO field trips are one of the central activities in the course. Participants are introduced to text-based virtual environments on the Internet through metaphoric on-line "field trips" on their computers. Since MOOing requires synchronous interaction (all participants must be on line at the same time), the complication of scheduling is unavoidable. Different time zones often require that the class meet late at night or on a weekend for the MOO field trip. Other preparation includes contacting the field trip sites to ask for permission for a group visit and providing sufficient information to help participants prepare for it. Despite these potential complications, participants find this experience rewarding.

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Description of the Activity

In a unit where the focus is on classroom atmosphere, we take participants to two MOOs: SchMOOze University, a MOO designed specifically for learners of English as a foreign or second language, and TAPPED IN, designed for teacher professional development.

The SchMOOze U visit is the first opportunity for the distance participants to meet and interact synchronously; the trip is not only a new learning experience but also a rare opportunity to socialize for the on-line class. Typically, an itinerary for the trip indicates that in the first trip participants will be introduced to ways of helping their learners function in this environment. Participants explore this environment in small groups with the instructor providing necessary support. During this time, participants realize the difficulties involved in text-based MOO navigation. They also see possibilities as well as problems in interacting with people outside of the class in this environment. Participants realize that they must develop ways of supporting learners and of dealing with safety concerns. A follow-up discussion is conducted asynchronously on the class electronic discussion forum after the first trip. The purpose is for participants to talk about their experiences and insights from the perspective of a new learner. Participants also discuss potential activity designs using this virtual environment.

On the second trip, to TAPPED IN, the group is introduced to a different kind of MOO setup by an outside expert from the host site. The expert helps with some of the participants' concerns and questions. The group tries out some of the activity designs that they came up with after the first field trip. The discussion in the MOO is in-depth and related to teaching and learning in the MOO environment. Another follow-up discussion is conducted in the class discussion forum for participants to compare and contrast their experiences in the two MOOs and to discuss their insights from the perspective of educators. The student facilitators and the instructor then conclude the activity with a summary of the discussion.

Impacts

We observe two kinds of impacts of this MOO field trip activity: (1) it encourages collective reflection and (2) it fosters a sense of community within the on-line group.

Encouragement of Collective Reflection

Reflection is an important daily activity that a successful teacher must do in order to learn from her experiences, successes and mistakes in everyday practice (Schon 1987). During the MOO field trip, the participants experience how it feels to lack control, what kind of help is useful, and how they can manage the flow of conversation to become active and independent participants. Since the experience is full of new opportunities and ideas, participants are eager to share their thoughts after the trip. We see participants reflect on the issues in the roles of both learner and teacher. Examples of the kinds of questions upon which participants reflect are presented in Table 1.

	Participants as learners reflect on:	Participants as teachers reflect on:
Affective issues	• The feeling of losing control or being left behind. • The appreciation of support from the group or from the instructor.	• How to provide learners with more support. • How to make sure that the environment is safe for our learners. • How to prepare to support learners.
Skills and structure issues	• Difficulties in following the conversation with many people talking all at the same time. • "How painful it would have been if I couldn't type fast enough."	• What kind of activity structure will be helpful. • What the maximum number of participants should be. • If this learning environment is suitable for every level of language learners or if it is only for the

	• "Where are the graphics?"	advanced learner. • What if a learner cannot type well. • How related this on-line "talk" is to developing writing ability. • How people become used to all-text interaction. How visual learners react.
Purpose	• "Why do I want to come here by myself?" • "What can I get/learn from coming to a MOO besides joking around with other learners?" • "I was just being silly."	• What kind of activities/assignments might be useful. • What good learners get by coming here often. • Whether it is possible to have serious discussions on MOOs. • How to facilitate discussion in this medium so that it is more than a socializing activity.

Table 1. Participant reflections on their MOO field trips.

Fostering a Sense of Community Within the On-line Group

The second important impact that MOO field trips have is facilitating a sense of community. In this Web-based distance education class, participants use the asynchronous conferencing tool for most of the discussions. Although conferencing requires daily participation, the interaction is very different from that in the MOOs. In the conference, responses are delayed and little emotion is usually expressed. The result is a serious, business-like, no-fuss *academic* discussion. The MOO field trip is just the opposite. The participants' initial excitement is obvious by the way they and the instructors greet each other and interact light-heartedly. For example, on one occasion the instructor noticed that one participant from Kuwait suddenly became quiet for a long time during the MOO visit. Once the group knew that this person had a headache, everybody started asking the reason and asking her to take care and not to worry about having to leave early. During the MOO trips, the group finally has the chance to pay real attention to each person, giving sincere care, voicing concerns, and developing friendships. After the trip, even the asynchronous discussion becomes more personal.

Our observations have convinced us of the power of synchronous interaction in fostering a sense of community in on-line classrooms. Following the suggestion of previous student groups, we have moved the MOO visits to an earlier part of the course so that a sense of community can be developed from the beginning of the semester.

It is important to note this activity would not have worked as well if developing a sense of community were all we wanted from it. MOO field trips are meaningful to our participants because they match perfectly with our goal of encouraging our participants (who are language teachers) to use technologies selectively and reflectively. When the excitement of on-line socializing dies down, we need to show that there is a deep meaning in this experience.

Strategy 2: Integrating Experts

Johnson (1997) and others support the integration of mentor teachers into teacher education courses. She concludes that making such links can help pre-service teachers link theory and practice and become more integrated into the community. At the same time, mentors or external experts are encouraged to reexamine their own practice and expand their role to that of teacher educator. In this on-line methods course, experts are integrated into the final project.

Description of the Activity

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During the first week of this four-week project, participants hand in a one-page inquiry brainstorm that briefly explains a problem that she has or anticipates in her language classroom. The participant also describes her learners and their goals and proposes a variety of possible solutions to the problem. Participants then find an external expert who is willing to facilitate the development of a solution. Participants find experts through professional electronic discussion groups, a Web search of similar topics, a review of the literature associated with the topic, or a recommendation from the instructor. Participants consult with their expert during the development of a technological solution to the problem that they outlined. Participants are responsible for contacting this colleague and for the interaction that they have. Along with the solution, participants complete and turn in a reflection, which describes

- How the project a) solves the problem posed and b) meets conditions for optimal learning.
- How/whether the participant's learning goals (new skills or knowledge) for the project have been met (difficulties/ problems encountered and how they were solved).
- How the solution could be improved in terms of the 8 conditions for optimal classroom language learning discussed in class (if more time/money/skills were available).
- How the professional colleague helped (or didn't) and what difference it made to the project.

One of the criteria for grading was the degree of interaction with colleagues, inside of class and out.

Impacts

Participants' projects range from designing authentic grammar activities on the Web to creating lessons that integrate technology for other teachers to use. In their reflections, learners noted that "my colleague gave me lots of useful suggestions" and "I really appreciate my colleague...Hopefully, this project can really assist EFL high school students." Some of the participants interact with more than one "consultant" to get several views of their solutions; often, participants receive help with technical problems from one expert and content ideas from another. One student noted that for her it was "an unforgettable and

Broader than the idea of classroom community, integrating experts into this project helps participants to understand and become more a part of a wider community of practice. In addition, through the combination of working on a personal inquiry project and doing so with colleagues external to the course, learners come to think of themselves as less dependent on the course instructor and more able to use their own resources to develop effective solutions to classroom problems and to find collaborators within the community.

Strategy 3: Small Group Case Studies

Learning with case studies can offer participants a variety of opportunities to expand and extend their skills, problem solving abilities, and grasp of contemporary issues in today's classrooms (Sudzina, 1999). Working on case studies also helps participants to build on shared experiences and promotes team building and a sense of community among learners (McLellan, 1998). The small group case studies used in this course allow participants to work closely with two or three of their classmates on a problem scenario that is closely related to their teaching contexts. The discussions within teams take place in a team space or chat room found in the course's electronic forum. This discussion is open to other participants and the instructor, and participants in each team are encouraged to critique, provide encouragement, and recommend ideas to help other team efforts.

Description of the Activity

At the start of the course during a recent semester, the instructor surveyed participants about their interest in and commitment to teaching various levels of learners (elementary, secondary, and adult). Three case study scenarios were then designed to encourage participants to work on issues and concerns related to using technology in the language classroom. Participants were placed in teams to work on a case that, as far

as possible, related to their interests. The instructor also attempted to group participants based on their diverse learning experiences and expertise with technology.

Participants began planning and organizing tasks for their project by using the course's chat room facility on the conferencing forum. These synchronous chats were aimed at helping team members to brainstorm ideas for the project and to work out task assignments among the team members. Participants continued working on the project using the course's asynchronous conferencing forum. Several electronic folders were created to help participants organize this content. This included a Proposal Sample folder that contained guidelines, a Resource folder where participants could point others to related works, and a Discussion folder for participants to work through ideas on the case study and attach works-in-progress. The goals for these asynchronous discussions were to build on and refine ideas for the final product.

Impacts

Working through the case studies, participants develop a continuous sense of collegiality with their on-line classmates. This leads to the creation of invaluable support groups in the class. Since the team has to decide on solutions within a limited time (five weeks), many participants use a wide variety of tools and strategies to interact with their peers. Through this process, their thinking about the issue at hand becomes deeper and more meaningful than if they were to complete the project on their own. In addition, participants' reflections reveal that through working on case studies in small groups using different communication modes, they feel:

- encouraged (*"...great job!! this chat is encouraging me to work harder ..."*);
- they optimized and extended their abilities (*"I found the courage to do some summarizing and push for development of our ideas"*), and (*"I don't usually take a leadership role, but was able to do so to some*
- their efforts were rewarding (*"I learned a lot from being able to develop something WITH other working with a variety of educators was very enriching"*); and
- they learned other useful skills ("*There are also lessons about management*").

Several considerations were taken into account when designing the case studies for this class that can be used as a guideline for similar courses. First, instructional and learning strategies in CALL learning environments as discussed in assigned readings were integrated. In addition, the case studies addressed the contexts for which CALL-related instructional strategies were designed and implemented. This involved having participants discuss the learning conditions and consider possible administrative constraints faced in these instructional settings. The need for participants to interact and share ideas in various ways (e.g., e-mail, chat rooms, document exchange, etc.) was made an integral part of the activity. Finally, opportunities for feedback (such as formative assessment and reflections) were built into the discussion as well as into the final report.

Conclusion

There are many ways for participants in an on-line methods course to become members of a class or wider community, but these opportunities must be carefully planned and well facilitated. In *L530*, the computer-assisted language learning methods course, the three strategies of MOO field trips, integration of experts, and use of a case-based format impacted learners in important ways. These strategies encouraged learners to think deeply about the course content and its applications, create bonds with other members of the community of technology-using language teachers, and to reflect about their teaching practice. By both helping participants overcome the sense of isolation that to many is inherent in distance education and providing alternative ways for participants to receive support for learning, these strategies are assisting us in meeting our goal of delivering quality distance teacher education.

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7 BEST COPY AVAILABLE